



The Cleveland Museum of Art

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Contact: Adele Z. Silver

Important Native American Basket on Loan to Art Museum

The most famous basket weaver in the world created the basket that is now on exhibition at The Cleveland Museum of Art. Dat So La Lee made this basket in 1904-05 and gave it the name *Beacon Lights*. Its flame design is said to commemorate the large signal fires built on hills and mountains whenever it was necessary to call her tribe, the Washoe people, together. The golden white, dark brown, and ebony black design is created with 29 stitches to the inch, 80,000 meticulous stitches in all. Each basket Dat So La Lee wove between 1895 and her death in 1925 was thoroughly documented by her agent and patron, Abe Cohn, of The Emporium Company of Carson City, Nevada.

This intriguing relationship between a storekeeper/collector and a basket weaver of the Washoe, who occupied the area around Lake Tahoe on the border of California and Nevada, made possible her unique body of work and his comprehensive record of it. For more than thirty years Dat So La Lee (Louisa Keyser) and her husband, Charley Keyser, lived and worked in a house Mr. Cohn provided; he kept an exact record of her work--the natural materials she scoured the landscape for, the number of stitches, the months she worked on each piece--and his inventory and notes still provide impeccable descriptions.

The superb condition of *Beacon Lights* can be credited to the care given it by its owners since 1914. In that year, Mr. and Mrs. G. A. Steiner of Pittsburgh bought the basket--acknowledged then and ever since to be Dat So La Lee's masterpiece--from Cohn for \$1,400. It was the last of Mr. Steiner's frequent Western trips before his death in 1916, and the basket was the finest single object in his important collection of nearly 500 baskets. Between 1913 and 1937, most of the Steiner collection was on loan to the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh, but in 1937 the then-director of the museum asked to have the gallery space occupied by the Steiner baskets made available for other things.

"Interest in American Indian art was at a low ebb," according to Mr. Steiner's grandson, the architect William Steiner Huff. The baskets went into airtight barrels for the next 35 years. In 1972, in pristine condition, they were transferred to the museum Mr. Huff designed, in honor of his grandfather, on the family farm that was the home of his mother, Elsa Steiner Huff, Mr. Steiner's youngest daughter. In 1994 Mr. Huff, the owner of *Beacon Lights*, agreed to lend it to The Cleveland Museum of Art.

Dat So La Lee made 121 major baskets in the thirty years of Abe Cohn's patronage. A few early ones (1895-99) are experiments, usually small (the largest 8" high) flattened horizontal baskets with very wide mouths. The early classic baskets (1899-1914) are bolder; the size increases dramatically, on average a foot tall, and the shape becomes more vertical with a high shoulder. *Beacon Lights* is the pinnacle of Dat So La Lee's early classic work.

Throughout her career, Dat So La Lee was faced with the problem that every painter confronts, but in reverse: to unify a three-dimensional surface (the horizontal curving willow rods of the basket) with a two-dimensional design (the pattern stitched with the sewing material that vertically ties the willow rods together). Her solution, in *Beacon Lights* as in most of her finest classic baskets, is to subordinate the curving form to the flat design. Its all-over pattern is infinitely extendable and seems to float over and beyond the limits of the basket shape.

The Cleveland Museum of Art has exceptional works from many Native American basket-weaving traditions. Particular strengths of the Museum collection are Pomo, Pima, Apache, and Tlingit works. Dat So La Lee's basket makes a splendid addition, though a temporary one, to the Museum's holdings.

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For additional information or photographs, please contact Adele Z. Silver, Public Information Office, The Cleveland Museum of Art, 11150 East Boulevard, Cleveland OH 44106-1797; 216/421-7340.